Of the City of the Saved... Prologue

by Philip Purser-Hallard

The young madwoman in the Tube carriage is recounting, in painstaking detail, the imminent future history of the City. Her cracked voice rises then descends to murmurs, as she delineates diverse catastrophes due in the coming weeks.

It would make grim listening if anyone were paying attention, but her fellow passengers are awkwardly, apologetically ignoring her. The Neolithic sculptor in designer furs; the family of burnished bronze/chrome cyborgs; the tall robed Bedouin and the red-beard Viking; the slim six-armed posthuman and her troglodytic lover--each of the other passengers gazes ahead, embarrassed, at the wormhole-vortex outside the carriage windows.

No-one ever listens to Kassandra, daughter of Troy.

The City is troubled, nonetheless. An unquiet breeze is rustling in its lanes and alleyways--whispering in innumerable ears, rippling the surface of a myriad lives. There is a sea-change coming, it whispers, dark clouds roiling in from your imaginary horizons. Something is abroad, something that does not belong alongside your safe afterlives with all their comforting and comfortable certainties. It has no form, but spreads among you like a fashion or a rumour. Call it an urban legend. Or simply call it change.

Most of the Citizens--the resurrected human populations of the vanished Universe itself--are ignorant of its passing as they go about their business, their parties and affairs and carnivals and works of art. Their recreated existences satisfy and thrill them. They pay no heed to hints that this great festival of resurrection might one day come to an end.

Some listen, though, and these remember the assault by the War-time powers three decades before. They recall uneasy rumours: that the powers have developed potent weapons, capable of harming or killing Citizens within the City's galaxy-wide bounds; that agents back in the (original) Universe have been recruiting entire human civilisations to act as their fifth column in the City. In tabloid headlines, T-shirt slogans, conspiracy forums and murmuring campaigns, these reckless imaginings are propagated.

Some voices in the vast Chamber of Residents, and even the City Council itself, call for active monitoring of the partially human 'collaterals,' the aliens unworthily resurrected by mere virtue of miscegenous ancestries. Hard-liners urge the closure of the Uptime Gate into the Universe, even (surely suicidal) pre-emptive strikes against the Warring powers themselves.

At the secret Parliament established in the City by the resurrected members of Faction Paradox, discussion concerns itself with more arcane matters. A spate of dangerous omens has begun to sweep the City, a plague of ill portents spreading concern among the superstitious (among whom the Parliament's members are proud to count themselves). The enigmatic Godfather Avatar, whom few present have seen without his tricorn hat and heavy antlered bone-mask, catalogues them for the Mothers and the Fathers in a whisper like the death of leaves.

In Augustus District, a wizened haruspex slices open the belly of a pterodactyl imported from the Earth's Jurassic period, and spreads the scaly skin wide. He stares at its entrails in perplexity for some long moments, before crying out in horror. His fellow augurs hustle him away, wide-eyed and babbling, then return to torch the pterosaur's bloody remains.

Experimenters in a lab at Clarendon University discover unexpectedly that the traces drawn by certain subatomic particles, when accelerated through a light-emitting substrate, have begun to spell out occult sigils in a depraved alphabet. The signs appear to be building up into a sequence. The Head of Department closes down the project before it reaches its conclusion.

Madame Apollina's Occult Supplies Shop in Red Ochre Park is deluged by customers returning packs of Tarot cards, which they say are 'stacked.' Invariably, the first card drawn by these cartomancers is The

Tower (Reversed). The icon of the City's Watchtower crumbling into debris takes on a worrying ubiquity for Apollina's harried staff.

At the Conclave of Prognosticators, dissent arises while interpreting one delegate's (particularly sensationalist) oracular pronouncement. The representatives from the Union of Sibyls stage a mass walkout, ignoring pleas for reason from convenor Nostradamus.

In pious San Pedro District, a statue of Madonna is seen weeping tears of sacred oil, and can (so certain worshippers have claimed) be heard quite faintly humming 'Like a Virgin.'

In Supplicity District a boy-child is born with a single head, arising from the centre of his shoulders. His bicephalic parents gaze at him in fourfold dismay.

Across the City, princes and presidents, prophets and precogs, awake from feverish dreams of dark messiahs and of the fall of empires.

These events, though, are distractions. (Except for the deliberations of the Parliament, that is. To dismiss the Faction is never a wise idea.) Transitory moments, they are of ultimately no significance: at the most they represent the City's interrupted subroutines at nervous play. The events of true significance to the City--the seeds from which stories arise as emergent structures, signal out of noise--are to be found elsewhere.

For instance...

In a rundown residential-cum-business block in Paynesdown District, a man who is called Rick Kithred observes a stranger loitering in the back yard. While at the opulent villa owned by the Ignotian family, the housekeeping software informs a youth named Urbanus that his great-grandfather wishes to see him.

Councillor Ved Mostyn of Wormward District is wondering what to wear for his hot date tonight (he's thinking maybe manacles). Julian White Mammoth Tusk, a City-born Neanderthal, peers despondently into his bank account and wonders how to pay his detective agency bills.

Three academics face unique dilemmas. Large numbers of barbarians start migrations. A minotaur gets drunk with a hermaphrodite. A private eye named Tobin fingers the handle of her gun distractedly.

And--inevitably--into more than one of their lives will shortly stalk Godfather Avatar himself, of the Rump Parliament of Faction Paradox, on bony limbs.

Because even in the City of the Saved, nothing is ever quite that unpredictable.